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## **Labour supply and skills demands in fashion retailing**

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## Introduction

If, as Adam Smith once famously suggested, Britain was a nation of shopkeepers then it is now a nation of shopworkers. Retail is now a significant part of the UK economy, accounting for £256 billion in sales and one-third of all consumer spending (Skillsmart, 2007). It is the largest private sector employer in the UK, employing 3m workers, or 1 in 10 of the working population. For future job creation in the UK economy retail is also similarly prominent and the sector is expected to create a further 250,000 jobs to 2014 (Skillsmart, 2007). The centrality of retail to economic success and job creation is apparent in other advanced economies. For example, within the US, retail sales is the occupation with the largest projected job growth in the period 2004-2014 (Gatta et al., 2009) and in Australia retail accounts for 1 in 6 workers (Buchanan et al., 2003). Within the UK these workers are employed in approximately 290,000 businesses, encompassing large and small organizations and also a number of sub-sectors. This variance suggests that retail should not be regarded as homogenous in its labour demands. Hart et al. (2007) note how skill requirements and the types of workers employed may differ across the sector. This chapter further opens up this point, providing an analysis of the labour supply and skills demands for the sub-sectors of clothing, footwear and leather goods, which are described by Skillsmart (2007: 48) as being ‘significant categories in UK retailing’.

The chapter initially outlines the nature of the UK retail workforce and the skill issues facing the sector, particularly focusing on soft skills. Influenced by Hochschild (1983) these soft skills have mostly been conceived within the paradigm of emotional labour and equated with having the ‘right’ personality and attitude (for example, Callaghan and Thompson, 2002). Consequently, much of the discussion surrounding soft skills has tended to concentrate on employees’ social and interpersonal abilities and whether or not they are responsive, courteous and understanding with customers. However, this description of soft skills is partial. Whilst the importance of employee personality and attitude has been extensively discussed the issue of appearance has tended to be overlooked. Recent work has sought to rectify this oversight and has led to the development of what is termed ‘aesthetic labour’, involving the manner in which employees are expected to embody the product in industries such as retail and hospitality (see for example Warhurst et al. 2000; Nickson et al. 2001; Warhurst and Nickson, 2007a). This labour refers to the hiring of people with corporeal capacities and attributes that favourably appeal to customers’ senses and which are then organizationally mobilized, developed and commodified through training, management and regulation to produce an embodied style of service. As part of this process of embodiment, employees are now expected to not only demonstrate soft skills associated with personality and attitude but also in their ability to ‘look good’ or ‘sound right’.

The chapter thus contributes to debates about the labour supply and skills demands in retail, reporting the findings of a survey of clothing, footwear and leather goods retailers in the Greater Manchester area in the UK. The chapter also offers insight into the variability of retail work, offering some support for the notion that fashion retail is different from other parts of the retail sector in the types of worker that it attracts, principally due to the soft skills demands of the sub-sector and the nature of the job.

## **The retail workforce and skills challenges**

In the UK and elsewhere (Buchanan et al., 2003; Gatta et al., 2009) there are two main sources from which retail employers draw their labour: women and young workers. Although not as gendered as other industries, such as social care, retail still nevertheless has a predominance of women workers, with 60 per cent of the workforce in the UK being women, many of whom work part-time (Skillsmart, 2007). Scott (1994) has pointed to women being seen by retail employers as a source of cheap, flexible and high quality labour as their inherent 'feminine' skills are seen as being synonymous with the required soft skills. Equally, retail tends to be a young industry with a third of all workers under 25 years of age, a figure far higher than the economy as whole (Skillsmart, 2007). A large proportion of these young workers are students, such that they are now considered to be a structural part of the retail labour market (Huddleston and Hirst, 2004). As with women, students are deemed to be particularly attractive to retail employers due to their flexibility, cheapness and highly developed soft skills (see for example, Canny, 2002; Curtis and Lucas, 2002; Nickson et al., 2004).

For employers these soft skills centre on having the right personality, attitude and appearance, and are deemed to be important in delivering good customer service. In their survey of 147 retail and hospitality employers in Glasgow Nickson et al. (2005) found that 93 per cent of their respondents attributed significant importance to the image of customer facing staff. At the point of entry into the organization employers were much more concerned with the right personality and right appearance, which were considered important by virtually all respondents; while formal qualifications were regarded as important by only 20 per cent of respondents. Once in the organization, employers placed much greater emphasis on the importance of customer facing employees' social and interpersonal and self-presentation skills (respectively 99 per cent and 98 per cent of respondents deemed these important) compared to technical skills, with 48 per cent of employers considering this aspect important. Bunt et al. (2005) also found that the skills demanded by retail employers in new recruits for sales and retail assistants, retail cashiers and checkout operator jobs centred on self-presentation, verbal communications and interpersonal and team work skills.

However, there are concerns about deficits in such skills, particularly in sales occupations, the largest occupational grouping in the retail workforce (Skillsmart, 2007). Hart et al. (2007) note that skills gaps in retailing are higher than the figure across the economy as a whole (26% vs. 22%) leading them to suggest that 'the adverse impact of these skills gaps for retailers can include difficulties in meeting customer needs, providing quality service and also increased organizational costs' (p. 272). This point is especially true when it is recognized that skills gaps are particularly acute for sales and elementary occupations and that customer handling skills are especially lacking (Skillsmart, 2007). As well as contending with skills gaps amongst existing employees, retail employers may also face labour and skill shortages, creating recruitment difficulties:

While few organizations have difficulty recruiting sales assistants, attracting the right candidate is often difficult. A lack of people with the right 'attitude' has been seen as a major barrier to success ... some retailers may be looking specifically for young people who 'look a certain way', this is especially

important in some designer fashion retail outlets. (Huddleston and Hirst, 2004: 8)

In sum, across the retail sector as a whole there is evidence to suggest that employers face difficulties in recruiting employees with the appropriate soft skills and ensuring that existing employees are sufficiently skilled in customer service.

### **Appreciating the importance of sub-sectoral level analysis**

Whilst the previous section offered a broad overview of the nature of the retail labour market and skills demands it is also important to recognize the diversity within the sector. The 4-digit Standard Industrial Classification (SIC) descriptors list 24 sub-sectors in UK retail (Skillsmart, 2007). Thus there is the potential for significant differences between sub-sectors in terms of product and labour markets and the type of skills demanded.

In their work on food and electrical and electronic goods retailing Mason and Osborne (2008) found significant differences regarding the type of labour and the skills demanded to get and do a job. Food retailing organizations relied on female part-timers, mostly with childcare responsibilities, and to a lesser extent students and older workers. These employees were expected to have a 'positive attitude', friendliness, communication skills and basic numeracy and literacy, in short customer service skills. Electrical retail firms differed markedly having mainly full-time male staff with pre-existing knowledge of electrical and electronic products. The greater emphasis on product knowledge meant that 'it was taken for granted that these selection criteria would lead to a predominately male workforce as a result of prevailing social attitudes towards electrical and electronic goods' (p. 152). Basic pay was also greater in electrical retail firms, sometimes supplemented by sales commissions. The provision of generally full-time employment, higher pay, greater emphasis on product knowledge and on-going training lead Mason and Osborne to characterize electrical retailers as adopting a 'high road' approach to managing their employees. This approach contrasts with the 'low road' food retailers, with their reliance on low paid, part-time, largely female employees who receive limited training.

As well as the differences in terms of people management practices there is also a further issue with regard to perceptions of retail work. More specifically, some sub-sectors appear more attractive to potential employees than others and potentially some brands may be deemed more attractive within those sub-sectors. The Retail E-Commerce Task Force (2002) surveyed 2500 young people (11-19 year olds) on their perceptions of working in retail and found that certain sub-sectors were seen as more 'trendy' than others. Fifty eight per cent of 1218 girls interviewed put fashion retailing as their first choice. For boys sportswear was most popular (23.8%) followed by games and software (18.5%) and music (14.8%). Clearly there is also a gender dimension to this stratification and clothing, footwear and leather goods is more gendered than the retail sector as a whole. Pettinger (2005) notes how 72 per cent of the workforce in these sub-sectors is female, compared to 60 per cent across the sector as a whole.

There is also emergent work which suggests that there may be differences in workers' self-perception depending on the sub-sectors where they work. Wright (2005), for

example, suggests that workers in the UK book trade see themselves as very different from, and superior to, other retail workers. Drawing on interviews with 30 managers and workers (including 15 shop floor workers) in three high street chain book retailers, Wright suggests that the appreciation of books and reading, which were deemed essential to getting jobs in the bookshops, are 'ascribed a certain value that places the trade in general in a hierarchal position over other trades and in particular in hierarchal positions over other workers' (p. 311). Thus even though bookshop workers, as with other retail workers, are low paid, they see themselves as distinct because of the product they are selling and their personal attributes and characteristics. In terms of personal attributes 27 of Wright's interviewees were graduates and they invested in their work a high degree of appreciation of the cultural goods being sold, which was dependent on the persona of a well read, cultivated self, built on appropriate cultural capital and 'middle classness'.

This sense of workers deriving status or cultural capital from their employment is also apparent in Johnston and Sandberg's (2008) ethnographic account of an 'exclusive' department store where the predominately female employees were recruited not only because of their physical attractiveness, but also on the basis of their understandings of class and taste. In a similar vein Walls (2008) in his ethnography of fashion retail found his co-workers would often contrast the 'coolness' of fashion retail to other retail jobs such as being a supermarket checkout operator. Leslie (2002) suggests that whilst fashion retail shares the low pay and part-time hours of the retail sector as a whole, the sub-sector is distinct from other forms of retail employment in: its prevalence of sales quotas for employees; its strict enforcement of image and presentation rules; and the blurring between employees' identities as consumer and workers, for example noting how many fashion retail workers seek a job as a means to procure a store discount to purchase goods, with evidence that top end fashion houses offer the highest reductions (Shedden, 2003).

Furthermore, within fashion retail there may be differences between product offerings, such that certain brands may well have greater cachet than others. Pettinger highlights differences between aspirational brands which are usually 'highly fashionable, designer intense and "cool"' (Pettinger, 2005: 469) and more prosaic brands. She describes an 'ideal' worker in the pseudonymous company, Fashion Junction, which offers expensive products in a highly designed environment:

The worker, wearing current stock and with appropriately fashionable hairstyle and make up, appears as a consumer as well as a worker, signalling what is fashionable to customers, and how they might look in the 'right' clothes. Workers at such stores are not only fashionably dressed, they are young, usually slim, with 'attractive' faces (2004: 179).

Though the aestheticization of workers was particularly pronounced within Fashion Junction, a number of the other less fashionable brands still aimed for a certain 'style', with prescriptions on appearance and dress, seeking workers to embody that style. In the more design-led stores, such as Fashion Junction, employees would be expected to 'model' current stock, whilst in other more mass market companies' employees would wear a corporate uniform. Pettinger (2005) therefore argues the need to analyse a range of stores to allow for the development of a typology which can distinguish the

different types of aesthetics required from designer outlets to less stringent mass market chains.

Recognising differing employer requirements across several retail sub-sectors Buchanan et al. (2003) develop a continuum which ranges from goods that 'sell themselves' to goods that require product knowledge or more advanced skills of workers in order to make sales. Supermarkets are positioned on one end of the continuum as representing goods which essentially sell themselves. Labour supply for sales assistants is characterized as being mature aged women returning to work and juniors still at school. The contrast is specialized book and music stores and fashion retail. Mirroring the findings in Wright's work, employers are seeking tertiary qualified workers with expertise in the product. The same is also true for fashion retail where labour supply was seen as being students and European mature women with wealthy husbands. Interestingly for specialized book and music and fashion retail Buchanan et al. suggest that labour and skills shortages are unlikely with employers able to source the required cultural capital from the external labour market. Supermarkets, however, struggled to attract quality labour. Clearly then it is useful to develop an analysis of labour supply and skills demands by sub-sector to appreciate why these differences may exist and what they may mean in terms of the employment opportunities available to different segments of the labour market.

### **Research Methodology**

The chapter draws on a postal survey of retail employers of clothing, footwear and leather goods (SIC codes 52.42 and 52.43) in the Greater Manchester area. This area is a major shopping destination in the North West of England with retail a key driver of its recent economic development (Skillsmart, 2004). The North West has the largest amount of new shops and stores being constructed in the UK (Skillsmart, 2007), with obvious implications for employment opportunities, including for the unemployed. Moreover in some of the shopping districts in Greater Manchester, clothing and footwear comprise nearly half of all retail business (BMG, 2005; 2006). Significantly, retailers in Greater Manchester have stated that a key reason for the existence of hard-to-fill vacancies for sales and customer service staff in general is the low number of applicants with the required soft skills (Skillsmart, 2004).

The survey was administered to a sample of 500 retailers. From the sample a final response rate of 35 per cent (n=173) was achieved. The questionnaire was addressed to the store manager and included sections on recruitment and selection, skills demands, and skills shortages in potential recruits or skills gaps in the current workforce. Questions in these sections explored employer demand for aspects of emotional and aesthetic labour as well as qualifications and other job-related needs. Questions were also asked about organizations clothing and appearance policies and their approaches to training and appraisal. Using SPSS, results were first used to arrive at descriptive statistics and frequencies. Where differences were obtained between establishments the results were tested for statistical significance using chi square tests or one way analysis of variance (ANOVA) depending on the nature of the variable under investigation.

### **Research findings**

### *Establishment and workforce characteristics*

The vast majority of the establishments (73%) that partook in the survey study were branches of multi-site chains. Such organizations may be realistically expected to have centralized practices in place regarding skills policies and also more formalized branding strategies. Participating establishments were relatively small with an average of 22 employees, although size varied considerably. All establishments in the sample catered for customers of a variety of ages and typically for both sexes. Quality and style were seen as more important to customers than cost by the respondents. Only 39 per cent of establishments rated cost as ‘very important’ or ‘essential’ to their customers, compared to 80 per cent for quality and 82 per cent for style.

Employers were asked about the demographics of their front line workers. On average, 74 per cent of staff in each establishment were female, supporting the view that fashion retailing is more gendered than the sector as a whole (Leslie, 2002; Pettinger, 2005). Front-line workers were typically young with, on average, almost 60 per cent of establishments’ workforces aged between 16 and 25. Approximately 41 per cent of staff in each establishment were students and only 47 per cent of staff worked full-time, reflecting variable labour demand and that many staff were in education. Despite hiring many students, employers typically reported that staff needed either no or only basic education to get the job, reaffirming that front-line retail staff need little formal education. Additionally, very few staff had a specialist retail qualification.

### *Employer demand for employees getting and doing the job*

Tables 1 and 2 examine the criteria stated by employers to be important for employees getting and doing the job. Employers were asked to rate these criteria on a five point ascending scale from ‘not at all important’ to ‘essential’ (representing a minimum score of one and a maximum of 5).<sup>1</sup> The tables present frequencies of response and mean scores.

As shown in Table 1, reflecting the findings of Bunt et al. (2005), employers rated personality and appearance as the most important aspects when *selecting* front-line staff with 80 per cent suggesting that personality was either ‘essential’ or ‘very important’ and 68 per cent the ‘right’ appearance. Just over 41 per cent viewed previous experience as either essential or very important whilst only five per cent rated formal qualifications in this manner.

**Table 1: Factors important in selection**

	N	% reporting ‘very important’ or ‘essential’	Range	Mean	Std. Dev.
Right personality	170	79.7	3–5	4.15	0.71
Right appearance	170	68.2	1–5	3.84	0.80
Previous experience	170	41.1	1–5	3.36	0.85
Qualifications	169	4.6	1–5	2.14	0.86

Factors that might be regarded as features of emotional labour were regarded as most important to employers in performing front-line work (see Table 2). A range of other

factors were also considered as ‘very important’ on average and reported as ‘very important’ or ‘essential’ by over 50 per cent of employers. These factors included but were not limited to technical skills, product knowledge and also one element of aesthetic labour; dress sense and style. Still ‘fairly important’ on average (with mean scores >2.5) were other aspects of aesthetic labour, such as voice and accent and overall physical appearance. Other factors recognized as being ‘fairly important’ were job experience and the ability to use equipment. Aesthetic requirements of customer-facing work were thus related more to clothing and style than physical appearance *per se*, consistent with the importance that establishments believed customers placed on ‘style’; and the workers that can best embody that style (Pettinger, 2004; 2005).

Formal education and qualifications clearly lack importance to employers, even though employers indicated that technical skills were important (see Table 2). Age, weight and height were also, apparently, not a great concern for employers. It may be that employers were aware of the delicacy of these potentially sensitive physical characteristics and were underplaying their importance in their response to the survey.

**Table 2: Characteristics important in performing front-line work**

	N	% reporting ‘very important’ or ‘essential’	Range	Mean	Stan. Dev.
Ability to work with others	170	85.0	2–5	4.25	0.69
Ability to deal with customers	171	84.0	2–5	4.30	0.74
Availability and rostering	166	65.9	1–5	3.84	0.79
Product knowledge	170	65.5	1–5	3.86	0.88
Work ethic	166	63.0	1–5	3.68	1.03
Outgoing personality	169	60.2	1–5	3.72	0.83
Dress sense and style	168	57.2	1–5	3.68	0.88
Knowledge of store operations/procedures	170	54.3	1–5	3.66	0.93
Ability to use equipment	169	48.0	1–5	3.47	1.00
Voice and accent	170	27.2	1–5	2.89	1.06
Previous job experience	166	28.3	1–5	3.07	0.84
Overall physical appearance	156	21.4	1–5	2.72	1.05
Formal education/qualifications	170	8.6	1–5	2.35	0.87
Age	164	7.4	1–5	2.07	0.92
Height	162	4.6	1–5	1.72	0.84
Weight	162	4.1	1–5	1.83	0.85

### *Recruitment and selection*

As with other research findings on service industries (see for example Lockyer and Scholarios, 2004) the survey results indicated that in Manchester retailing there was heavy reliance on informal recruitment methods, with the most popular being referrals from current staff (64%) and window adverts (60%). The high figure for referrals also reflects that many retailers have incentive schemes in place for employees who refer potential recruits to the company. Two formal methods were the next most frequently reported categories; recruitment agencies and job centres (both 48%) whilst 42 per cent used company websites. Other methods such as advertising in the local press, rehiring old staff and accepting casual callers were reported by 23 per cent to 32 per cent of establishments. The use of informal methods such as referrals suggests that employees may be recruited who ‘fit’ with employees already in the establishment

and possibly, therefore, the establishment's brand. It is also the case that casual callers and those responding to window adverts typically present themselves in person which may be advantageous in allowing employers to screen for soft skills, especially those associated with aesthetics and appearance (Nickson et al., 2005).

Employers tended to use the 'classic trio' of application forms/CVs (60/78%), interviews (71%) and references (60%) when selecting front-line staff. In addition, 24 per cent of the Manchester employers reported using role plays, 17 per cent product knowledge tests, 11 per cent requested photographs of applicants and ten per cent used job simulations.

Employers were asked which selection methods were the most useful for selecting front-line staff. Almost two-thirds of respondents stated that interviews were the most useful method, giving a 'usefulness ratio' of 0.87 for those employers using interviews. The usefulness/use ratios for CVs, application forms and references were 0.40, 0.48 and 0.22 respectively. For role plays, however, the usefulness ratio was 0.58 suggesting that more employers could consider role plays, possibly at the expense of CVs, application forms and references. These findings indicate that employers prefer the opportunity to interact directly with potential employees, to allow them to make an immediate assessment of applicants' emotional and aesthetic labour potential.

### *Skills shortages*

Managers were asked to rate the difficulty of recruiting for a range of job-related characteristics (see Table 3). Contrary to claims such as those of Huddleston and Hirst (2004) about skills shortages in applicants' attitudes and appearance, only a minority of employers in our survey had any significant difficulty in terms of the desired soft skills amongst potential employees. Where most difficulty did exist was in recruiting employees with the appropriate product or operational knowledge. It should be noted, however, that both knowledges can be very basic (Warhurst and Nickson, 2007a).

Aside from these most 'difficult' aspects only four characteristics were reported as 'very difficult' or 'impossible' to recruit by over ten per cent of establishments (previous job experience, availability and rostering, the ability to deal with customers and work ethic). It was, therefore, 'harder' and more technical skills, abilities and knowledge which were perceived as causing skills shortages rather than factors such as personality, dress sense and style.

One explanation for this finding is that fashion retail has greater cachet than other types of retail. As noted earlier the Retail E-Commerce Task Force (2002) found that sub-sectors such as fashion, music/video, sport and software/games were seen as 'trendy' and the most appealing for potential young employees. Similarly Walls (2008) found that amongst his co-workers (many of whom were students) fashion retail was often seen as part of an informal hierarchy, very different from working in a supermarket, for example. It is very possible therefore that those applicants who possess the appropriate attitudes and appearance are more likely to be attracted to fashion retail leading to fewer skills shortages. This finding would also support the work of Leslie (2002) and Pettinger (2004; 2005) who recognize that many fashion

retail workers already have a pre-existing identification with the brand as consumers; a process that is further reinforced when working in the store.

**Table 3: Characteristics difficult to recruit**

	N	% reporting 'very difficult' or 'impossible'	Range	Mean	Stan. Dev.
Product knowledge	169	26.0	1–5	3.01	0.82
Knowledge of store operations/procedures	168	21.4	1–4	2.76	0.86
Work ethic	165	14.5	1–4	2.55	0.90
Ability to deal with customers	167	13.9	1–5	2.61	0.85
Availability and rostering	164	11	1–5	2.59	0.81
Previous job experience	166	10.4	1–5	2.50	0.84
Voice and accent	165	8.7	1–4	2.21	0.89
Formal education/qualifications	164	8.7	1–5	2.22	0.87
Outgoing personality	166	7.5	1–5	2.27	0.83
Ability to use equipment	166	4.6	1–4	2.19	0.69
Dress sense and style	166	4.1	1–5	2.23	0.75
Ability to work with others	167	2.9	1–5	2.21	0.67
Age	157	2.3	1–5	1.83	0.75
Weight	152	1.2	1–4	1.61	0.65
Physical appearance	156	1.2	1–4	1.74	0.61
Height	152	-	1–3	1.58	0.60

#### *Importance of image and appearance*

To further establish the importance of image and appearance the existence of, and reasons for, employers having clothing and appearance policies were explored. The vast majority of respondents (82%) reported that their companies had standards rules or expectations relating to clothing worn at work. The most widely stated reasons for having clothing policies was for employees to fit the image or brand of the company (83%) and to ensure that staff looked 'neat and presentable' (81%). A smaller proportion of employers (50%) reported that they used clothing policies to standardize the appearance of their staff. The emphasis on style and branding reflects earlier findings regarding the importance of the dress sense and style of front-line staff rather than physical appearance *per se*.

The importance of image or style was reiterated in employer responses to questions about the significance of certain factors in implementing clothing policies. Conformity to company brand/image stood out alone as, on average, 'very important'. Local manager's preference, customer preference and adherence to employment law were, however, on average, viewed as only 'fairly important'. These findings thus add further support to Leslie (2002) and Pettinger (2004; 2005) that organizations are concerned with the self-presentation and the aesthetics of individuals primarily as a means to convey brand image.

Clothing polices were also used for sales purposes. Fifty-five per cent of employers stated that clothing policies were used to 'model' current stock, with current stock the most popular source from which staff clothing was drawn (48% of establishments with a clothing policy). The next most popular source of staff clothing (dedicated company clothing) was reported by less than a third of establishments with a clothing

policy. The use of staff as ‘models’ indicates employee appearance was used to sell products as well as to complement the image of the establishment (see also Leslie, 2002; Pettinger, 2004).

Employer appearance policies were also explored in the survey. Seventy-four per cent of establishments rated the appearance of customer-facing staff as either ‘very important’ or ‘essential’. As with clothing, more than four out of five establishments had an appearance policy or standards. The most common subject covered was personal hygiene and general tidiness, reported by 91 per cent of establishments with an appearance policy. The next most commonly reported aspect, consistent with the results overall, was clothing style (76% of those with a policy). Bodily adornment was also covered widely, with 55 per cent stating that make up and personal grooming was included in the appearance policy, 50 per cent facial and bodily piercing, 49 per cent jewellery and 44 per cent visible tattoos. The aspects most rarely covered by appearance policies related to physiological characteristics and speech. Voice and accent was included in the policies of seven per cent of workplaces, age in five per cent, weight in four per cent and height in two per cent. It is of course possible that not selecting employees on the basis of these physiological characteristics is seen as too straightforward to necessitate formal policy or are under reported in the survey due to concerns about legality and discrimination. With respect to weight for example, in their earlier piloting of aesthetic labour research in Glasgow, Warhurst and Nickson (2001) were told by one worker that her boutique fashion store employer screened out female job applicants with the larger dress sizes over size 16 as a matter of course.

As with the clothing policy, respondents were asked *why* they had an appearance policy, with conformity to company brand and image again the stand out factor, viewed as ‘very important’ or ‘essential’ by 60 per cent of establishments (see Table 4). Three other factors were rated on average as ‘fairly important’, namely, local manager’s preference, customer preference and adherence to employment law. The importance of brand image to fashion retailers in implementing aesthetic labour policies is thus reinforced further still.

**Table 4: Organizations stated reasons for appearance policy**

	N	% reporting ‘very important’ or ‘essential’	Range	Mean	Stan. Dev.
Conformity to company brand/image	146	59.5	1–5	3.84	1.13
Local manager’s preference	148	41.8	1–5	3.24	1.15
Customer preference	138	31.2	1–5	3.06	1.15
Adherence to employment law	113	19	1–5	2.75	1.46

Differences between establishments were analysed to determine whether ownership structure (independent, chain or a franchise of a larger chain) or customer preferences affected the implementation of appearance and clothing policies. This analysis revealed that establishments that were part of a chain or franchised were approximately twice as likely to have clothing or appearance policies as independent stores, a finding that was statistically significant (see Table 5). This propensity may reflect the informality within independent shops or the fact that management is closer to the market and can personally communicate ‘strategy’ changes to staff without

resorting to explicit policies. At the same time larger establishments are more likely to have explicit human resource policies, which will encompass rules for employee clothing and appearance. ANOVA analysis also revealed that chains were also statistically more likely to report that company brand/image was more important in the instigation of clothing policies.

ANOVA analysis also revealed that where the customer base was concerned with style, an applicant's previous experience was deemed as more important in performing front-line work. Furthermore, the same analysis highlighted that where customers were reportedly more concerned with style, employer brand/image was deemed as more important in implementing appearance policies. Employers may, therefore, seek applicants' experience of the style-driven market and have employees who are more obviously style conscious where style matters more to their customers. The demands of a sector's customers may, therefore, impact upon the skills and other attributes which employers seek. Caution must be exercised with this finding however as only a small number of establishments reported that style was unimportant to their customers.

**Table 5: Establishments (%) reporting rules/standards/expectations regarding...**

	Independent single site operations	Independent franchised operation	Branch of a chain of shops	Chi square value
...the work clothing of customer facing staff	48.1	100	92.9	35.28***
...the appearance of customer facing staff	44.4	100	92.8	39.43***

\* sig at  $p \leq 0.05$ , \*\*  $p \leq 0.01$ , \*\*\*  $p = 0.000$

### *Training and Appraisal*

Despite the importance of workers' aesthetic and emotional capabilities, the most commonly provided types of training were related to 'technical' aspects such as product knowledge and company procedures. Training in 'soft skills' was, however, also widely reported. Ninety-two per cent of establishments provided training in product knowledge and 81 per cent did so in 'company systems and equipment'. Training in company clothing standards was, however, reported by 71 per cent of establishments whilst 43-44 per cent of establishments reported providing training in social/interpersonal skills or self presentation/physical appearance.

Those employers providing presentation and physical appearance training were asked to elaborate on this training. The two most widely cited elements it were dress sense and style and body language; both reported by 46 per cent of employers answering the question. In addition, 35 per cent provided training on what to say, 25 per cent in make up and personal grooming and eight per cent in voice and accent coaching. The fact that dress and style training was one of the two most widely reported subjects of physical appearance training supports the fact that it was the element of physical appearance viewed as the most important in carrying out customer-facing work.

Through assessing which elements of employees' work were appraised, the centrality of certain skills can be further established. As with training, the most commonly cited

matter on which staff were appraised was product knowledge (reported by 71% of employers). The second most popular subject of appraisal was use or knowledge of company systems/equipment, reported by 60 per cent of respondents. Soft skills were appraised, with 57 per cent of employers reporting that self presentation and physical appearance were included in appraisal, 56 per cent that adherence to company clothing standards was included and 47 per cent social and interpersonal skills.

Whilst the correct appearance is important in getting customer facing work, with certain elements also important in performing the work (especially dress sense and style), it is product knowledge which was the most useful performance indicator for these retail employers. Thus product knowledge was the area of appraisal highlighted as the 'most useful' (44% of employers), followed by social and interpersonal skills (36%) and then company systems and equipment. Only 17 per cent reported that self presentation was the most useful element of appraisal and 14 per cent adherence to company clothing standards. Notwithstanding the usefulness of product knowledge in appraisal, when investigating the usefulness ratio (proportion reporting element was the most useful/proportion using the method) social and interpersonal skills had a ratio of 0.77 and product knowledge 0.62. These ratios suggest that more employers could consider the use of social and interpersonal skills as a means of appraisal, despite the increased demands for product knowledge in the clothing, footwear and leather goods sector.

## **Discussion and conclusion**

The results from the Manchester survey affirm a number of the findings from survey evidence reported by Nickson et al. (2005) on the Glasgow retail and hospitality industries. In both surveys employers were more concerned with the soft skills of applicants, such that having the 'right' personality, attitude and appearance was considered essential to do front-line work. Employers in both surveys were more likely to use informal recruitment methods. There was also evidence in both surveys of employers having prescriptions which outlined what constituted an acceptable appearance, through the use of appearance standards and dress codes. Training was also more likely to be offered with regards to harder technical aspects, such as product knowledge. Beyond these similarities there were also differences between the Glasgow and the more sectorally-focussed Manchester surveys. These differences raise a number of important issues.

A significant difference between the surveys was the issue of employer skills demands at the point of entry to the company, specifically in terms of how employers rated technical skills. Only 40 per cent of employers in the Glasgow survey rated technical skills as 'important' or 'critical'. By contrast, two-thirds of the Manchester employers rated product knowledge as very important or essential, alongside approximately 50 per cent who similarly rated the ability to use equipment and knowledge of store operations and procedures. Although product knowledge is not a 'skill' per se such requirements could conceivably fall within the technical skills category. As such this finding shows the relative importance of product knowledge in particular to retailers in the Manchester clothing, footwear and leather goods sub-sectors (a finding also contra to that of Gatta in this volume). Given that the products in the sub-sectors of Manchester research are likely to be those requiring to be sold rather than sell themselves (Buchanan et al., 2003) there is likely to be a concomitant

need for greater product knowledge amongst workers. Leslie (2002) for example argues that employees in fashion retail are expected to have considerable knowledge of fashion and design and are expected to impart this knowledge in order to increase sales. This recognition of the relative importance of technical skills requires further analysis, an analysis that explores the nature of such 'skills'. For example, it might be simply knowledge of the latest stock or a combination of knowledge of stock and an ability to discern what suits a customer and how to sell it to them (as with a personal shopper).

There were also several noteworthy differences in the findings from the two different contexts with regard to some aspects of recruitment and selection, most notably the use of job centres. Employers in the broader Glasgow survey were 70 per cent more likely to report the use of job centres than their Manchester counterparts. This difference may be as a result of the skills which are being sought at the point of recruitment and selection, as many job centre recruits are from the unemployed or less privileged backgrounds. Employers may see any requirement for style and cultural capital as more forthcoming in students or workers from middle class backgrounds, and style was clearly an important factor in these establishments. This requirement for style may explain the substantially lower use of job centres among the more focused Manchester retail sub-sector. On the issue of skills shortages, Glasgow employers experienced more problems than Manchester employers in terms of whether applicants had the required interpersonal and social skills, rather than finding those who had the necessary technical skills. Manchester employers had less difficulty attracting the desired interpersonal and aesthetic skills, image or style. As we have previously argued the explanation for this finding could lie in the greater cachet ascribed to fashion retailing compared to other areas of retailing (Walls, 2008).

Recognising the above issues, Warhurst and Nickson (2007b) have recently sought to extend the debate about interactive service from a focus on work to workers. In particular, in arguing for a 'labour aristocracy' among certain groups of retail and hospitality workers they suggest that there may be different forms of service encounter than simply one of servility. A range of recent work (see for example, Johnston and Sandberg, 2008; Leslie, 2002; Pettinger, 2004; 2005; Wright, 2005) points to the manner in which some retail workers see themselves as distinct and not axiomatically redolent of the servile front line workers suggested in many accounts. In this regard there may be an argument that work in fashion retail is perceived to be glamorous work, done by glamorous people. This point has implications in terms of which qualities, related to soft skills are deemed to be important by fashion retail employers, and the potential for these to be proxied through signifiers such as class, gender and ethnicity.

Within the specific context of fashion retail recent accounts recognize that the feminine and masculine performativity required in doing the work is overwhelmingly middle class (Leslie, 2002; Walls, 2008). In this respect middle classness is being recast as a skill. A key implication is that the demand for soft skills may thus benefit the middle classes, including students, whilst disadvantaging other workers. Indeed, Warhurst and Nickson (2007a) suggest that there is a displacement effect in much service work, with students, who in the UK still tend to have middle class backgrounds, taking jobs that other types of workers, those from working class backgrounds and the long-term unemployed, may have been expected to fill.

Certainly the relatively high level of student labour reported in the findings would be consistent with such an argument.

This point is particularly true, because as Witz et al. (2003: 41) note the ‘embodied dispositions’, or what can be perceived as aesthetic capacities and attributes that are recast as part of the soft skills demanded by employers in much interactive service work ‘are not equally distributed socially’. As such many individuals may lack the required soft skills to access employment in the interactive service sector. This issue may be particularly pronounced in fashion retail, which attracts more students who are more likely already possess the desired soft skills if these skills are really associated with middle classness.

In addition to class and gender there is also the issue of ethnicity. MacDonald and Merrill (2009) have recently attempted to consider the intersection of these social constructs in interactive service work, noting how workers’ ‘performance’ has to align with certain customer and management expectations and in that sense, ‘the service performance may be more or less aligned with the gender and ethnic identity of the worker’ (p. 116). This latter point is also picked up by Leslie (2002) in her claim that the skills required in retail align with being white (see also Moss and Tilly, 1996). Whilst past research on the social construction of skill has tended to focus on the effect of gender, it is now clear that more research is required into the intersection of gender, class and ethnicity on the social construction of skills in retail. Moreover, and as Gatta also indicates in this volume, the construction of these skills also acts to create discrimination, with implications for access to retail jobs for workers deemed to be disadvantaged. In simple terms those who are unemployed, working class or from the ‘wrong’ ethnic background<sup>ii</sup> are seemingly less likely to secure employment in fashion retail.

This chapter has set out to explore the potential variability in retail work through an analysis of the clothing, footwear and leather goods sub-sector. What this and other research points to is that there is clearly variability within retail work. Focusing on the labour supply and employer skills demands in this sub-sector, this variability clearly exists. The source of this variability stems from potential differences between different types of jobs, dependent on aspects such as the sub-sector, market niche, labour market from which employees are largely drawn and the required skills for getting and doing the job. The research also indicates that this variability manifests a hierarchy of jobs in retail as well, implying potential labour market discrimination. Further research is still required to explore the social practices and material conditions of a range of different retail jobs to allow for the development of richer accounts as to why these differences exist and how they impact on labour supply and skill demands.

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## Endnotes

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<sup>i</sup> The intervening points were 'not very important' (2), 'fairly important' (3) and 'very important' (4).

<sup>ii</sup> See for example Fleener (2005) for a discussion of the recent Abercrombie & Fitch case where the company agreed a near \$50 million settlement with plaintiffs from a number of minority ethnic groupings, including African Americans, Latinos and Asian Americans. These plaintiffs either failed to get jobs or were excluded from sales floor positions as their natural physical features did not represent the company's conception of 'natural classic American style'. It was argued by the plaintiffs that the 'A&F look' was 'virtually all white' and as Corbett (2007: 155) notes 'these plaintiffs succeeded when the attractive look the employer was seeking was not just pretty, but pretty and *white*' (emphasis in original).